New York Theatre Critics' Reviews 1950

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"Arms and the Man"

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NEW YORK JOURNAL-AMERICAN · NEW YORK WORLD TELEGRAM & THE SUN
NEW YORK POST HOME NEWS · NEW YORK HERALD TRIBUNE
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New York
Theatre Critics' Reviews

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"Arms and the Man"

The New York Times

October 20, 1950

Shaw's 'Arms and the Man' Acted With Francis Lederer and Sam Wanamaker

By BROOKS ATKINSON

Bernard Shaw's "Arms and the Man" is not different from any other play in one respect: It needs to be acted and directed. In the version put on at The Arena last evening, it is not really played until the second act, when Will Kuluva comes on as the barbarian father with pretensions to gentility and Sam Wanamaker comes on in a bravura performance in the part of the attitudinizing Major Sergius.

Since Francis Lederer has nothing more than an insipid giggle for the iconoclastic part of Captain Bluntschli, and since Lee Grant is not yet experienced enough to play the disingenuous part of Raina, two of the most important roles are wasted throughout the evening. For Bluntschli, the chocolate soldier, and Raina, the romantic fraud, are essential to the gaiety of the comic dance Mr. Shaw wrote in 1904.

* * *

Perhaps the company will settle down and really get to work now that the horror of the first night is over. That is a dispensation devoutly to be wished. For "Arms and the Man" is a crackling play that discharges wit in any number of directions.

We are accustomed to think of it as the comedy that debunks the heroism of the battlefield—Shaw always looking ironically at the realities of human nature. He is the realist; his characters are the mountebanks. But now that the management of The Arena has had the goodness to restore "Arms and the Man" to the stage, it discloses other qualities that are equally refreshing.

* * *

It takes mischievous little pokes at many other things: the code of ethics of the servant class, the spurious grandeur of the upper classes, the snobbery of culture, the fraudulence of good taste. In the early days of the century, before public relations were professionally organized, Shaw could apply his slapstick specifically to Bulgaria without inviting patriotic picket-lines and setting in motion all the machinery of nationalistic recriminations. It was an innocent world he was writing for, and he was having a lot of fun.

There is still some fun in it when the actors play it with relish. Anne Jackson recognizes the humors in the coquettish part of the ambitious servant girl; and Josephine Brown's bustling, pouting Madame Petkoff is sound low comedy.

But the chief animating forces in the revival are Mr. Kuluva and Mr. Wanamaker. Mr. Kuluva's hoarse, boorish stupidity and Mr. Wanamaker's high style in gallantry are skillful and funny. It would be pleasant if the whole performance were pitched in that exuberant key.

"ARMS AND THE MAN"

Revival of the play by Bernard Shaw; staged by Richard Barr; settings by Paul Morrison; presented by David Heilweil and Derrick Lynn-Thomas at the Arena Theatre, October 19, 1950. The cast:

Catherine Petkoff..... Josephine Brown
Raina Petkoff..... Lee Grant
Louka..... Anne Jackson
Capt. Bluntschli..... Francis Lederer
Russian Officer... Milton Selzer
Nicola..... Fred Stewart
Maj. Paul Petkoff... Will Kuluva
Maj. Sergius Saranoff.... Sam Wanamaker

Synopsis: The action takes place in a small Bulgarian town near the Dragoman Pass in the year 1885. Act I. A lady's bedchamber. Late in the evening. Act II. The garden of Maj. Petkoff's house. Six months later. Act III. The library. After lunch.

Journal-American

October 20, 1950

Music Would Help 1894 Play in 1950

By ROBERT GARLAND

Historic, you can call it. For "Arms and the Man" is the first Bernard Shaw play to be presented in America. The theatre was the Herald Square. The date was Sept. 17, 1894. Richard Mansfield was Captain Bluntschli. Beatrice Cameron was Raina Petkoff. And also Mrs. Mansfield.

It was produced as an operetta something like 15 years later. At the Lyric. Called "The Chocolate Soldier," it had music by Oscar Straus. Ida Brooks Hunt took the leading role, Nadina Popoff. For the most part, it has been sung, rather than said, ever since. It calls for music.

And although it is well spoken in The Arena—Lee Grant is the non-singing Raina Petkoff, Francis Lederer is the non-singing Captain Bluntschli, Sam Wanamaker is the non-singing Sergius Saranoff, Josephine Brown is the non-singing Catherine Petkoff—there are times when music would help.

For, in 1950, Bernard Shaw sounds — at times, anyway — kind of thin. There are moments when a tune would come in handy, when "My Hero," "Forgive," "While My Lady Sleeps" or "The Letter Song" would be a welcome relief. But they are not there and you have to do without them.

* * *

Museum Piece

You, as well as I, did without them last evening. And, although we missed them more often than we said, we got along without them just the same. We had some better Shavian dialogue instead. Better, and it must have been shorter. The whole thing was over before you could say Bernard Shaw.

I have never known "Arms and the Man" to seem shorter than it did last evening. That, too, is in its favor. For the wit of 1894 is not the wit of 1950. Or maybe the wit of Mr. and Mrs. Mansfield is not the wit of, say, Francis Lederer and Lee Grant. Or of Lee Grant and, say, Sam Wanamaker. Or of——.

Anyway, "Arms and the Man" is a museum piece laid out on the Hotel Edison floor. A small Bulgarian town near the Dragoman Pass in the year 1885 is very far away. Martially speaking, it is out of this world and in no other. Therefore, it can be fictional! It can, and does, be Graustarkian and amusing.

And, when played that way, it is Graustarkian and amusing. But, in Richard Barr's uninspired directorial hands, it is not always played that way. And when it is not, the Oscar Straus music would come in handy. Especially as the songs are more familiar than they are not. Especially those in act three.

* * *

Not Shaw's Best

In the round, on the square, "Arms and the Man" is a novelty. It is a novelty to see it as it was written. It is a novelty to have it said, not sung. It is a novelty to get the last part of the story straight. It may not be a better story than the music men made it, but it is different.

It is nice to see Lee Grant out of "Detective Story," and, as I had forgotten, "All You Need Is One Good Break," and into "Arms and the Man." She, a good Neighborhood Playhouse girl, is used to the means and methods of Bernard Shaw. They are becoming to her. She is becoming to them.

Francis Lederer and Sam Wanamaker are nearly enough Shavians to be taken for the real thing. And they look nice in the Brooks Costume Company's uniforms. Mr. Lederer, who is serious, and Mr. Wanamaker, who is fun. They could carry these qualities into their parts and, I think, they would be happier.

But I would not be surprised if "Arms and the Man" is just about as good as you— or David Heilweil and Derrick Lynn-Thomas of the Arena — can make it. It is not. It never was, one of Bernard Shaw's more brilliant plays. The Edisonians are aware of this. Every last one of them!

NEW YORK Herald Tribune
October 20, 1950

By OTIS L. GUERNSEY JR.

The Coating Melts

AFTER a successful summer operation, the Hotel Edison's Arena has thrown its hat into the autumn ring with a round revival of George Bernard Shaw's "Arms and the Man." With Francis Lederer as the chocolate soldier and Sam Wanamaker as the strutting cavalryman, this comedy of military manners is not able to acquire much of a sparkle until near the end of its three acts. Certainly Shaw is by no means dated, but it is a fuzzy and vacuous production that has been arranged under Richard Barr's direction. In the intimacy of theater-in-the-round staging, this show appears to contain more of foolishness than of satire.

• • •

Playing a defeated enemy who takes refuge in a lady's boudoir and then comes back after the war to taunt her for her romantic view of love and battle, Lederer tries hard to fling Shaw's ironies toward all sides of the house. Wanamaker works with equal persistence as the would-be hero in a posing, mustache-twirling, foot-stamping performance. But in general there is a lack of delicacy and of consistent, controlled style in the execution of the revival. The play appeared in musical version under the title "The Chocolate Soldier," and, indeed, this appearance of it bears more resemblance to an operetta book than to a smooth-functioning piece of comic machinery.

• • •

In general, the actors seem to play more for themselves than in concert with each other, except in the final scenes which have acquired more of a polish than the others. Lee Grant is demure as the heroine who clings to her pretenses until the last minute; Will Kuluva is a guttural Bulgarian major, and Anne Jackson has considerable vitality as a democratic-minded maidservant. If there is any great and hidden fund of wit in this mockery of the romantic ideal of valor in war and chivalry among the ladies, it does not come up through the surface of the farcial treatment. As seen at the Arena, "Arms and the Man" is an oppressive bit of foolery which just manages to lift itself in time for a cheerful climax.

Daily Mirror
October 20, 1950

'Arms and the Man' Still Highly Amusing Satire

By ROBERT COLEMAN

As the latest in their series of interesting revivals by American and European authors and composers, David Heilweil and Derrick Lynn-Thomas presented Bernard Shaw's "Arms and the Man" at the Edison Hotel Arena last evening. While it does not rank with "Candida" or "St. Joan," for instance, the comedy has its merits.

There have been more effective satires written on war, but none, outside of Aristophanes' "Lysistrata," has struck us as being more amusing. And there is an amazing amount of romance involved for a script by the saturnine Shaw. It is romance, of course, penned with tongue in cheek. Maybe the old boy was kind of human, after all, in his younger days.

"Arms and the Man" hasn't been given here, as such, for many years, though there have been several productions of an operetta based on it: "The Chocolate Soldier." Like Shaw, this script has aged a bit, but both remain monuments of distinction. We suspect that students of the drama and Shaw fans will want to see it.

Heilweil and Lynn-Thomas have set a high production standard at the Arena with their theatre-in-the-round technique. The current revival maintains that standard. There is an excellent cast, including Francis Lederer, Sam Wanamaker, Lee Grant, Josephine Brown, Anne Jackson, Will Kuluva and Fred Stewart.

Young Miss Grant proves a revelation as the heroine. Heretofore she has played hard-boiled or slangy roles. In this instance she etches Raina Petkoff with charm, grace and delightful diction. Lederer is suave and ingratiating as the chocolate-cream soldier from Switzerland, while Wanamaker is appropriately bumptious and boastful as his Bulgarian rival.

Richard Barr's direction is first-rate, on the whole. However, we thought the timing was a little slow in the first act, and that he should have keyed it throughout at a more robust pitch. But it had the virtue of steadily improving as the evening progressed.

The Edison Arena is an intimate and friendly place in which to see a show. During the intermissions you may have refreshments at a lengthy, well-manned bar or at individual tables. And there is plenty of space behind the auditorium proper, in which to stretch the legs and greet friends.

Arena staging, as you know, calls for no scenery, but considerable imagination on the part of the customers. It is remarkable what atmosphere can be created with a few props, skillful lighting by Paul Morrison and top-flight performers. We always have a good time at the Edison Arena, no matter what the bill.

DAILY NEWS
October 20, 1950

'Arms and the Man' Languishes In a Theatre-in-Round Revival

By JOHN CHAPMAN

Bernard Shaw's plays are considered to be just as durable as is the old gentleman himself, and most of them are. Such works as "The Devil's Disciple," Saint Joan," "Man and Superman," "Candida" and "Caesar and Cleopatra" have brightened or ennobled many a recent Broadway season. But, on the basis of last night's theatre-in-the-round performance of "Arms and the Man" at the Arena, I would say that Shaw knew what he was doing when he gave this comedy away, royalty-free, to be made into an operetta.

As it was shown last evening in the ballroom of the Hotel Edison, "Arms and the Man" is not much fun, having neither bite nor vigor. It should be sung, not talked, under the title of "The Chocolate Soldier." The heroine should be giving out with Oscar Straus' "My Hero" instead of making mere conversation.

The story goes that Shaw was bilked only once in his life. He had written "Arms and the Man" in 1894, and a few years later a young German, Rudolph Bernauer, wrote him and said he would like to make a musical comedy libretto out of the thing. Shaw is supposed to have had so little regard for his own play that he told the young man to go ahead, without taking his usual precautions as to royalties. "The Chocolate Soldier" has been a perennial hit, but "Arms and the Man" has languished.

The comedy languished again last evening, and not all the heel-clicking and Continental manners of Francis Lederer, in the role of the chocolate-eating Capt. Bluntschli, could make it come alive. Similarly ineffectual were Lee Grant as the heroine and Sam Wanamaker as Saranoff, the military stuffed shirt. My chief amusement was provided by Anne Jackson, giving a nice, saucy performance as the maid, and by Will Kuluva as the heroine's father.

New York Post
HOME NEWS
October 20, 1950

Bernard Shaw and Arena-Staging

By Richard Watts Jr.

"Arms and the Man" is hardly among Shaw's major works, but it is gay and wise and charming, and it reveals the great man in one of his sunniest veins. I'm afraid, however, that if you don't go to the Arena of the Hotel Edison, where the comedy is being given a theatre-in-the-round presentation, forearmed with that knowledge, you will hardly discover it from the performance. This, it seems to me, is the least adequate production that Broadway arena-staging has yet offered, and no way to come upon a delightful play for the first time.

There is a possibility that things would have been better if Francis Lederer and Sam Wanamaker, who have the leading roles, had exchanged parts. You may disapprove of too great a dependence on type-casting, but it is my guess that Mr. Lederer, instead of playing the practical Swiss mercenary, would have been happier as the fire-eating Bulgarian, while Mr. Wanamaker might have managed a characterization as the sensible Shavian protagonist that he isn't able to offer as the romantic idiot given to leading cavalry charges.

Something Wrong

This, I must admit, is mere guesswork on my part. What is clear is that something has gone very wrong with the current performance of a most engaging comedy. Both Mr. Lederer and Mr. Wanamaker work with painstaking industriousness, but they are oddly ineffective for such experienced actors. And while Lee Grant, a charming and talented young actress, brings pleasant gaiety to the role of Raina, the romantic Bulgarian girl, she is only intermittently successful in making her characterization persuasive.

Indeed, only two of the players in minor roles struck me as capturing the true spirit and style of the occassion. Will Kuluva, a good actor, whom I last saw as the chief of the beggars in the Abbe Workshop production of Dunsany's "Gods of the Mountain," is excellent as the Bulgarian major, who thinks that bathing is a dangerous practice. And Fred Stewart, another reliable performer, gives effectiveness to his few scenes as the servant who strikes the Swiss mercenary as the smartest man in Bulgaria.

Military Spirit

As I say, "Arms and the Man" is, despite the fun and vitality that are still in it, a lesser Shavian comedy. Perhaps the fact that it has served so successfully as the libretto for that famous operetta, "The Chocolate Soldier," is indication of its basic slenderness as a play. Its satire on the romantic military spirit has undoubtedly lost some of its sharpness with the increasing modern familiarity with large-scale warfare. But, if some of the bite has disappeared, the winning flash of the Shavian wit and charm is still there.

Unhappily, that wit and charm are only occasionally visible in the current arena production. Although I must repeat that this is not one of Miss Grant's happiest performances, she at least brings vitality and brightness to the evening. So do Mr. Kuluva and Mr. Stewart. In general, though, the necessary deftness, lightness and style are missing, and the Shavian sparkle is rarely in evidence. It becomes a little difficult to remember that "Arms and the Man" can be a lot of fun.

New York World-Telegram
and
The Sun
October 20, 1950

'Arms and the Man' Staged in the Round

By WILLIAM HAWKINS.

Type—Comedy of G. B. Shaw.
Topic—Customs for a new society.
Mood—Honesty makes humor.
Performance—Unevenly limp.
I find it—Disappointing.

Shaw ought to be first-rate material for staging in the round, which is employed at the Edison Hotel's Arena. The setting, generally dispensed with in the circular theater, is never important as the attitudes of Shaw's characters toward themselves and each other.

Acid Observations.

In "Arms and the Man," Shaw has chosen to make some pungent observations on snobbery, hypocrisy and social distinctions in general. To do so, he has devised a tale of matchmaking amid some gingerbread warfare in Bulgaria in the Eighties.

The newlyrich Petkoffs are baby-like leaders of culture and society in a land recently freed from its long-time conquerors. Thus it is raw material which the playwright deals with in his arguments as to whether the hush-hush of Victorian superficiality will prevail.

There is nothing very complicated about the play's narrative. Raina Petkoff is contentedly engaged to the pompous Sergious, until an irreverent Swiss mercenary, fighting for the enemy, seeks refuge in her room. Before the play ends, the Swiss has inherited vast properties of a surprising kind, and been accepted as Raina's intended.

Sergius, by his heroic bombast, maneuvers himself into a position where he must marry the Petkoff's maidservant, an alliance which more than contents him.

Mass Stage Fright.

The bite and the procession of Shaw's ideas are sparkling theater that is hard to defeat.

The production at the Arena last night suffered from what appeared to be mass stage fright. There is no other ostensible reason for the starchless acting, the lack of attack on character, and the failure to get laugh lines off the floor. Not until the third act did the performance roll with any of the tingle you expect from a Shavian comedy.

Perhaps the acting was deliberately toned down because of the nearness of the audience in the Arena. If so, it is a pity, because the effect was of a hitching post being slapped with someone's pinky.

Apt Portrayal.

I found the most entertainment in Josephine Brown's portrayal of Mrs. Petkoff. She careened around like a dowdy, anxious old top-heavy clipper, trailing tattered sails in the breeze.

Francis Lederer played with charm and a sense that the laughs in the script were there to be extracted. Sam Wanamaker took a while to warm into the role of Sergius, but Lee Grant seemed undecided as to just what sort of person she wished Raina to be.

Will Kuluva gave substance to the father of the family, and Fred Stewart had a discernible pattern for the opportunistic servant. Anne Jackson struck me as being intent on substituting significance for wit as Louka, the maid.

Style and Quality.

The physical production is simple and striking. Paul Morrison has used color and style instead of quantity, in the furnishings.

Sitting in the balcony at the Arena gives one a remarkable view of the show with the fluidity necessary to service an encircling public. It also offers a revealing view of an audience at work.

"Burning Bright"

Daily Mirror

October 19, 1950

'Burning Bright' Deals With Weighty Theme

By ROBERT COLEMAN

In "Burning Bright," John Steinbeck has written an ambitious and somewhat obscure drama about the mysteries of birth and the complexities of life. He has written it in a pretentiously archaic language that is not realistic and yet never manages to scale the heights of true blank verse.

It is a language doubtless intended to suggest universality, since with but four characters the author has attempted to come to grips with universal truths. The trouble is that Steinbeck uses an obvious idea repetitiously for almost three acts, and then seeks to invest it with a number of symbolical meanings. It's a device that does not quite come off.

In the first act an elderly acrobat is nerve-wracked because he has not had a child by his young wife, a child to carry on the talents and traditions of a theatrical line extending back to the dawn of history. Knowing he is sterile, the wife decides to have a child by a young opportunist who has recently joined the cast.

In the second act, the acrobat has been transformed into a farmer desirous of an heir to insure his own immortality and the continued cultivation of his land. He is overjoyed to learn that at last he is to become a father. In the first scene of the third act, the farmer has become a ship's captain. He accidentally discovers that the child his wife is about to bear is not his.

In the concluding scene, after a tremendous emotional upheaval, he realizes that every man must be a father to every child, that every child is born into a world of paradox, a world of despair and hope, a world capable of brutality and beauty. That one man's egotistical pattern is but a small chip in the stream of life.

Reminiscent in its outline of "They Knew What They Wanted," "Burning Bright"—the title was suggested by William Blake's "The Tyger"—goes beyond that script in asking, "Why?" It is a play that demands constant attention, and occasionally rewards those who give it just that, with impact.

Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein 2nd have given the new arrival at the Broadhurst Theatre a fine production. Guthrie McClintic's dynamic direction, Jo Mielziner's imaginative settings, the acting of Kent Smith, Martin Brooks, Barbara Bel Geddes and Howard Da Silva are among its assets.

As the acrobat-farmer-captain, Smith acts with commanding drive. Martin Brooks is excellent as his adversary, as the third corner of the eternal triangle. Miss Bel Geddes is lovely and sincere as the wife, and Howard Da Silva is good as the earnst friend.

"Burning Bright" is designed to appeal to the intellect and emotions. We only wish it had made a more effective appeal to the latter. It aspires to the dimensions of Greek tragedy, but, due to its confusions, never achieves them. It gains your respect, but too often fails to stir you as deeply as it should. We think it will find a limited audience.

"BURNING BRIGHT"

Play by John Steinbeck; staged by Guthrie McClintic; settings by Jo Mielziner; costumes by Aline Bernstein; presented by Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein 2d at the Broadhurst Theatre, October 18, 1950. The cast:

Joe Saul.....Kent Smith
Friend Ed.....Howard da Silva
Mordeen...Barbara Bel Geddes
Victor.....Martin Brooks

Synopsis: Any Time. Act I. The Circus. Act II. The Farm. Act III. Scene 1. The Sea. Scene 2. The Child.

New York Post

HOME NEWS

October 19, 1950

The New Drama by John Steinbeck

By Richard Watts Jr.

John Steinbeck's "Burning Bright," which opened at the Broadhurst last night, is an odd, arresting and disturbing play. Although its narrative and writing are direct and simple enough for any reasonably intelligent theatregoer, its overtones and implications are somewhat less clear in their presentation, while Mr. Steinbeck's method for giving universality to his theme strikes me as not altogether satisfactory. There are many things to be said for and against the new drama as a work for the stage, but it seems to me there is a dignity and beauty of phrase about it that give it an inescapable quality of distinction.

Certainly Rodgers and Hammerstein have provided a production that is nothing short of superb. Jo Mielziner's settings are particularly beautiful in their Austere simplicity, and Guthrie McClintic's direction is sensitive and enormously skillful. As for the cast of four, it could hardly be improved upon. Kent Smith, the glowing Barbara Bel Geddes, Howard da Sylva and a new comer named Martin Brooks give portrayals in difficult roles that are close to perfection. There is likely to be great controversy about "Burning Bright," but there can be no disputing the brilliance of its staging.

The Narrative

There is nothing obscure about the story Mr. Steinbeck has to tell. As has been stated in many interviews, the topic is the rather unpleasant one of sterility. The central character is a strong, proud, powerful man, who is incapable of producing children. His longing for an heir is so great that his young wife, who loves him completely, has a child by another man, determined to make her husband believe that the boy is his own. In the end, while knowing the truth, he nevertheless comes to accept the offspring as his own. As a narrative, there is nothing more to "Burning Bright" than that.

But Mr. Steinbeck is doing more than telling a simple story. He is, it seems, giving us a sort of parable on the stubborn spirit of mankind. Joe Saul, the protagonist of his play, wants to bestow upon his offspring his nature, his spirit, his understanding of the world, and his pride in his work. It is to be the justification of his existence, and his contribution to the future. He is doomed to failure through his physical handicap, but mankind, vanquished in one way, finds some other way to continue and survive. He refuses to accept defeat, because he can still, he believes, transmit his spirit through the child of the woman who loves him so dearly.

Lyric Quality

All of this is set down amid dialogue that often reaches a quality of rare and eloquent lyric beauty. "Burning Bright" is always interesting and sometimes distinguished. There are times, however, when it fails to make its point with dramatic effectiveness or complete conviction. To give universal implication to what he is saying, Mr. Steinbeck, who has not written a realistic play but one that is frankly symbolic, shows his characters as, in the first act, circus acrobats, in the second farmers, and in the last, sailors, but I'm afraid that it doesn't quite work out as a dramatic device.

There is something of the mood of the early O'Neill in the drama, but it lacks some of O'Neill's best theatrical effectiveness. For one thing, the characters are a little too abstract to be properly moving as human beings. Here, however, the acting helps tremendously. Mr. Smith's troubled husband, Miss Bel Geddes' devoted wife, Mr. da Sylva's fiercely loyal friend, and Mr. Martin's unhappy young lover are unforgettable portrayals. "Burning Bright" is disturbing because its ideas do not always stand up in dramatic terms, but the quality of the writing is unmistakable.

New York World-Telegram and The [illegible] Sun

October 19, 1950

Heir's the Thing In 'Burning Bright'

By WILLIAM HAWKINS.

Type—Poetic drama.
Theme—Children are man's immortality.
Topic—Sterility.
Treatment—In generalized characters.
Debit—People lack color.
I find it—Unsatisfying.

If names were insurance, "Burning Bright" couldn't fail. Glance at the cast box, and note its illustrious auspices in every department. Despite all this, it seems to me cool and untheatrical, white somehow, and thin like a tune played with no chords.

It is about immortality, not in reference to a hereafter for the individual, but rather a continuation of life in your children. A man is a link in an endless chain of human beings.

Baby By Proxy.

Joe Saul, in this play, is acutely conscious of this function of a human, because at 50 he has no children. His young wife adores him. She knows he is sterile and insists there is nothing he would not do to prevent his threatened disintegration from worry.

Joe has a young and lusty assistent who suspects the problem, and goes cynically on the make for the wife. In desperation, she gives herself to him, in order to have a baby for Joe.

She neglects to anticipate this young man's falling desperately in love with her, which he does. His efforts to take her away are only stopped by Joe's lifelong friend. Finally Joe is made to face the truth and make his own adjustment to it.

Triumph Over Bitterness.

The audience last night listened to this play with rapt attention. To me, it holds one's interest with a promise of complexity and color which is never realized.

The fascinating story here is Joe's triumph over the bitterness he feels when he learns of his sterility and knows his wife's child is not his. But that whole development takes place in only the last few minutes of the play.

Previously, with unwarranted monotony, there is established again and again, Joe Saul's reverence for his own heritage and the importance of continuing his blood line.

The story moves chronologically, while the characters are transferred to various settings. First they are circus acrobats. In the second act they are farmers. In the third they are seafaring. Though it is not too clear, I believe these changes are intended to show that the basic desire for immortality through children applies equally to anyone with traditions which can be inherited.

Universal Theme.

The effort to make the theme universal seems to me to defeat the drama. The characters have no individuality, except insofar as this particular problem affects them. They lack personality and color, and reveal only broad instincts, such as courage, generosity or self-pity.

The result is that they are silhouettes with labels, moved about at the author's convenience. They never suggest having any life beside that on the stage of the Broadhurst Theater.

Although this is a play about deep and shaking emotions, the language in which it is told has no rapture. It never explodes. It has neither passion nor exciting images. Its vagueness is exemplified by the central figure's final, repeated assertion that in spite of everything, "there is a shining." I simply do not know what that means.

The cast is small and well mannered. Barbara Bel Geddes is the wife, Kent Smith the husband, Howard Da Silva the friend, and Martin Brooks the lover. They all play earnestly and honestly, but they are guilty of a singsong awe of their lines that makes them hard to listen to.

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Acting Excellent, But The Play Won't Hold

By ROBERT GARLAND

This "Burning Bright" is the third attempt John Steinbeck has made to work in his new form, the play-novelette. He does not know that anyone has tried it before. I do not know that anyone will try it again. Not with the hero, heroine and the other man changing their locale, if not their names, each interlude.

Both of his play-novelettes have been this way. Or so Mr. Steinbeck says. The first was "Of Mice and Men." This, produced in 1937, ran for something like 200 performances. The second was "The Moon Is Down." This, produced in 1942, ran for something like 70 performances. And now last night's performance.

With the title from William Blake, "Burning Bright" introduces a change of locale with each act. It is what makes the play-novelette a novelty. Otherwise, the baby who is not legitimate is no news. Not even in a play. You just do not talk about such a thing. Especially when it is planned by the mother, Mordeen.

Joe Saul wants a baby. But he is incapable. So Victor pinch-hits for him. Among the men, only Victor and Fred Ed know. And only after a bit, Victor will tell. So Victor must be hushed. Or must he? This is the problem Mr. Steinbeck sets himself to solve. To make it difficult, he makes it universal.

And it is universal. But not, I fear when spoken of out loud.

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Story Won't Hold

I do not believe it. But I confess that I do not always believe my disbelief. The performers, the performances are too good for that. But, after all is said and done, I do not believe it. I can not. I will not. It just is not believable. It just is not universal, either. Not when spoken out loud.

Why? Well, this is only guesswork at the present writing. But people do not talk the way John Steinbeck makes them talk. And people do not think the way John Steinbeck makes them think. Or, if they do—and they do not—they do not think out loud. Their thinking out loud is as bad as their talking. As incredible.

Maybe Guthrie McClintic is to blame. Maybe he, the director, believes what he is directing. Some good directors do. And, which is infrequent, maybe his actors believe it, too. Then, and not before, you achieve a miracle. Maybe a miracle does take place at the Broadhurst. But it does not last.

The minute the curtain falls and the house lights come up, Mordeen's baby disappears. It does not live. It does not die. It simply never was there. It is as simple as that. The story, not the actors, is at fault. The story will not hold...

Even I can not make it hold, no matter how I try!

• • •

Actors Grand

Even Barbara Bel Geddes, Kent Smith, Howard Da Silva and Martin Brooks can not make it hold, no matter how they try. The minute the curtain falls and the house lights come up, not only Mordeen's baby disappears. All the characters disappear. The mother. The father. The friend.

The playwright Mr. Steinbeck seems to order them to do it. His change of character but not of name—from Circusman Joe Saul to Farmer Joe Saul, from Farmer Joe Saul to Seaman Joe Saul—is not a change at all. Nor is that of the others. Circusman, farmer and seaman are one. And always will be.

This does not interfere with the amazing rightness of the actors' acting. From Barbara Bel Geddes to Kent Smith, from Martin Brooks to Howard Da Silva, the performances are grand. So is Guthrie McClintic's direction. So is Jo Mielziner's easy-going scenery. So are Aline Bernstein's easy-coming costumes.

So is everything and everybody—or everybody and everything — Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein 2d provided. So, when everybody and everything is grand and the whole is not—not when the curtain is down and the actors are not acting—something is not as it should be. I think it is the play.

Or John Steinbeck's play-novelette with three locales and one location.